
Power and resistance: A Foucauldian Reading of 'The Handmaid's Tale'

Dr. Nazish Khan

Associate Professor

Dept. of English

SSMMUSSS Govt PG College

Dwarahat (Almora)

Abstract

The Handmaid's Tale recounts harrowing experiences of a woman in Gilead, a patriarchal, totalitarian and dystopian society. This totalitarian state uses various modes to exercise absolute power and authority over its people like religion, control of knowledge, discourse and language, constant surveillance, fear, punishment and mutual distrust among the masses. Through this novel, Margaret Atwood demonstrates how power works to regulate, classify and exploit bodies, how power prevails and creates relations and also how power generates subversion and resistance. In the present paper I propose to analyze the structures of power and its resistance in a dystopia, in the light of Foucault's critique of power and its abuse.

Keywords: dystopia, power structures, control, resistance, patriarchy, fear and punishment.

A dystopia is a rigid, unforgiving and chillingly cruel community based on a system of strict discipline and punishment. Free will, diversity and individualism is sacrificed in the name of security and sameness. It depicts the conflict between the power of individual and the power structure of a totalitarian society. All dystopian fiction is speculative in nature and in its essence is a kind of forewarning to the readers to be aware of the inequalities, discrepancies of their present world. It serves as an implicit warning about what our society could become. In the same vein, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a sort of forewarning of the inequalities in our world, the prejudices, political control and lack of freedom, abuse of power and fundamentalism. These discrepancies are further aggravated by an atmosphere of fear and punishment in a dystopian world. Using the Foucauldian framework, I propose to examine the power structure depicted in the novel and the role the characters plain resisting those structures.

According to Foucault, in order for the individual to be transformed into a viable economic force, she/he must be regulated, disciplined and subjected. (*Discipline and Punishment*, 138) It is in the production of 'docile bodies' that such a society can continue to function via it's school, it's military and it's work force.(135-69) The society in *The Handmaid's Tale* produces 'docile bodies' through a variety of disciplinary techniques based on the control of individuals. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault describes four basics techniques of discipline which operate in *The Handmaid's Tale* and other dystopian novels as well.

The first technique is the spatial distribution of individuals. People are distributed/differentiated/grouped according to their function in Gilead. Apart from the ruling elite, the commanders, there are Aunts, Marthas, and Handmaids who have clearly demarcated and fixed roles in society. The second technique of discipline involves the control of activities for the

purpose of encouraging those activities that are useful for society and discouraging those that are considered counterproductive. (Discipline 149-56) In Gilead, activities are regimented through a series of reassigned and rigidly define roles. The expectation is that people should be either working at their jobs or participating in a community activity. A third technique of discipline is training the individuals. (Discipline, 156-62). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Red Centre is the institution which trains to inculcate those women who are new to Gilead to accept and absorb the rules and expectations of the Gileadean regime. It is a place which works on the malleability of these bodies so that they can willingly adapt to their new roles. They are brain washed and re-educated to consider their bodies as a means of production and a property of the nation. A fourth technique of discipline is the coordination of all parts(Discipline 162-69) so that the interests of the individuals are subordinated to the good of the community.

The stability of any strictly discipline society with rigidly define roles depends on the careful monitoring of all individuals. In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault describes the Panopticon, a building design in such a way that a supervisor can consistently keep watch on all the inmates. Foucault explains that effects of such surveillance were, 'to induce in the inmates a sense of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power'. (Discipline,201)

Foucault notes from the 18th century to 19th century the nature of the punishment changed significantly from being a public spectacle involving torture and execution to being an invisible force(Discipline,7-9) whereas in the public spectacle the sovereigns power was clearly manifested to the people, the invisible punishment manifested the 'continuously distributed effects of public power'. This inevitability of punishment created the fear in transgressors. A highly disciplined society is able to exercise its control and run the system by the means of enforcing the law of punishment and is able to maintain total control by collective fear of retribution. In *The Handmaid's Tale* all the people and the maids are consistently under the fear of the Eye, the secret Gilead police. The surveillance in Gilead is both panopticon and hierarchal. The handmaids are under constant surveillance by commanders, guardians, Eyes, Aunts, Wives of the commanders and even other handmaids who spy on each other. They do not even trust their peers. The power and dread of being watched was intensified by the fact that they were being watched at any given moment and it resulted in a kind of paranoia. This paranoia is pervasive in the society and people believe that their transgressions will not remain hidden for long. This fear has taken hold of people`s minds and their acquiescence to the strict laws is, in fact, dependent on this pervasive fear.

Foucault says, "Disciplinary power... is exercised through its invisibility; at the sometime it imposes on those whom it subjects, a principle of compulsory visibility". In *Discipline and Punishment*, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. (Discipline,187) The result of this unseen surveillance was that the state was able to produce a disciplined, orderly and predictable society in complete conformity and subservience.

Gilead was established by the means of a revolution that killed the President of the United States and the most of the congress by a faction calling themselves "Sons of Jacob" and

established a new republic based on theocracy. It is a puritanical, patriarchal, totalitarian regime which attempts to control society by enforcing one unified discourse and by creating a society that is essential panopticon in model. Gregory Claeys writes in *The Origin of Dystopia*, about the common theme in the dystopian literature in the 20th century is, “the quasi- omnipotence of a monolithic, totalitarian state demanding and normally exacting complete obedience from its citizens, challenged occasionally but usually ineffectually by vestigial individualism or systematic flaws and relying upon scientific and technological advances to ensure total control. (73)

The Handmaid's Tale and Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* portray a form of government that controls its citizens through the sexual ethics and practices. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, reproduction becomes the primary focus of sexuality which must be had within the bonds of marriage, or with a Handmaid in a sanctioned ceremony. The government regulates all sexual activity. Due to the widespread infertility in the ruling class, the handmaids assume a crucial and significant role of bearing the children of the commanders. However, romantic relationship or a relationship between the handmaid and the master outside the ceremony is strictly forbidden. The identity and worth of a woman is reduced to her capacity to reproduce. Reproduction is prioritized as a woman's primary purpose and contribution to the society. Although the handmaids are the worst sufferers, even the commander's wife Serena faces the same misogynist oppression. Just because she is not able to bear a child, which was considered the primary function of a woman, Serena is practically replaced in her own home. Since public life is not allowed for women, she is left without a purpose in the outside world, and in her own home she has to bear the humiliation of being a witness to ‘the ceremony’, the act where her husband has intercourse with the handmaid with the object of having children, in her presence. Women are turned into objects whose value depends only on their reproductive capabilities. The state has diluted the identity and worth of a woman to her womb.

Women are also separated from their true individual identities. Identity in Gilead is simplified into a few special roles that are assigned to them according to their capabilities. The fertile women become handmaids, others become Marthas or the cooks and the housemaids, and the elderly women become Aunts, who train the new Handmaids and inculcate them with the values of Gilead. All women wear colour coded dresses specific to their roles which clearly demarcates them from each other. The handmaids are even stripped off their real names and are assigned patronymic names based on their master's names like Offred, Ofglen etc.

The bodies of the handmaids are severely scrutinized to show how a body can be docile. Gileadean secret police- the eyes are everywhere. All the women are monitored constantly by the eyes and by machines, no one can move without passes. The panopticon model of surveillance is very much in force in Gilead to help it exercise absolute control.

For Foucault power is intimately associated with knowledge and power and knowledge directly imply one another. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that power/ knowledge is interrelated and there can be no existence of power without knowledge. The state in *The Handmaid's tale*, uses both panoptic and hierarchal surveillance on individuals and controls the knowledge and discourse in order to maintain power. This way the state can exert its power over the people by controlling their bodies and also their minds. Language and discourse are used as

fundamental devices of power. Women in Gilead are forbidden from reading, writing and engaging in social and political discourse. They have been relegated to the domestic spheres and hence are robbed of their existence as an individual with a free will. Their main function is to bear and rear children.

Knowledge, discourse and language is a tool which allows an individual to assume and dictate power in his/her society. A dominant theme of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the critical control of discourse and knowledge. Authorities in Gilead use language to subvert and rewrite and manipulate the past. Being a patriarchal and theocratic regime, Gilead believed that the kind of freedom that existed in the past was in a way responsible for the anarchy and now Gilead seeks to restore order with a new political discourse and language. Aunt Lydia tells the new maids that "There's more than one kind of freedom, freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it". (HT, 34). This is how the handmaids are indoctrinated in the state's ideas and beliefs. The official language seeks to reject the previous language and replace it with a fundamentalist discourse which must be accepted as normal discourse. Language is the medium for thoughts and by rejecting the previous language and discourse and controlling language, the state can control the thoughts too. Aunt Lydia says that it may be difficult for the first generation of handmaids to erase their previous knowledge, but the coming generation will only be indoctrinated in the philosophy of "freedom From" and they will never know the meaning of 'freedom to'.

Gilead not only denies literacy to women, but even goes to the length of replacing all literature with the Christian / biblical literature, which is read out to them by the men in their house. Since knowledge gives power, it could give women a tool to think, resist and rebel, so access to all knowledge is forbidden except bible to keep women subservient.

Foucault has also argued that power structures are inevitable in any society but there is always a simultaneous possibility of resistance to these power structures. In fact, power and resistance depend on each other for their existence. (The Subject and Power 140) Foucault writes that "It would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination that, by definition, are means of escape." (143) Both Foucault and feminist Critics agree upon four tenets of the dynamics of resistance –the body is the site of power, power operates locally as well as at the level of state, discourse produces power and Western discourse has been dominated by patriarchal values. (Diamond &Quinby) If body is the site where the power structures operate, then it can also be used by the individual to resist that power structure. In the extreme sense, destroying the body is the ultimate way for the individual to resist the external forces and take control. This sort of extreme step is taken by Ofglen when the eye comes to arrest her for her involvement in Mayday activities.

The person who offers maximum resistance to these power structures and the extreme control of the totalitarian state is Offred . The very tools of oppression used by Gilead are appropriated by Offred for resistance. Offred's narrative is a survival narrative. Separated from her husband and her daughter and equipped with undaunted will and determination to be reunited with her daughter, she takes each day as it comes and takes all the measures which would help her survive the stifling reality of her predicament. Gilead strips women of their autonomy and hence all women are relegated to the margins of the political structure. In this

patriarchal setup, women's voices are silenced and discarded but Offred is able to communicate her story, a narrative account of her experiences in Gilead. This very act of expressing oneself in a society which has purposefully and systematically silenced the voices of women in it is an act of resistance.

Women in Gilead are not allowed to read or write but paradoxically, Offred uses language as a tool to subvert and resist the autocracy of the dystopian society of Gilead. It is through her narrative that she records, that the reality of Gilead is exposed. Interestingly, Offred uses the language/ discourse of the past, the era that existed before Gilead to recount her experiences. As a society Gilead not only tries to control the present of its individuals, but also their memory, their past and history. The newcomers are indoctrinated with a new language which seeks to reject and suppress the previous language and replace it with a fundamentalist discourse which can control their mind and thoughts and erase their memories and their past. Offred's narrative becomes a medium to keep her sanity and helps her to resist and struggle against the rule in her own way. Although she cannot write because of the rules, but she is aware of the power of words and language.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the resistance is not to acquire power but instead to retain a semblance of humanity and individuality. Resistance manifests as a means to stay human in a dehumanizing environment. Offred struggles to preserve a sense of herself as a human being under the oppressive regime of The Republic of Gilead. Offred's resistance lies in not surrendering to all the dictates of Gilead, she dares to have a forbidden affair with Nick, has a relationship with the commander outside the 'ceremony' and in her own way refuses to be a docile body. Whether she is able to escape from is not clear but the epilogue of the novels shows that Gilead has fallen and the narratives of Offred offer a detailed account of Gilead to the world.

References

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985.
- Claeys Gregory, *Dystopia: A Natural History: A Study Of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, And Its Literary Diffractions*, Oxford University Press, 2017
- Cooper, Pamela. "Sexual surveillance and medical authority in two versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Journal of Popular Culture* 28.4 (1995): 49
- Diamond, Irene, and Lee Quinby, eds. *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988.
- Foucault Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Random House, 1979.
- _____. *The History of Sexuality, Volume One : An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Pantheon, 1978.
- _____. "Politics and the Study of Discourse", *Ideology and Consciousness* 3 (1978): 7-26
- _____. "The Subject and Power", <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197>
- Glenn Deer , Rhetorical Strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Dystopia and the Paradoxes of Power, *English Studies in Canada*, Vol18, No2, June 1992

Ketterer David, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale: A Contextual Dystopia
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239936>

Kouhestani Maryam, Disciplining the Body: Power and Language in Margaret Atwood's
Dystopian Novel The Handmaid's Tale, *Journal of Educational and Social
Research* MCSER Publishing, Rome-Italy Vol. 3 No. 7 October 2013

Staels Hilda, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale: Resistance through narrating
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00138389508598988>